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# ***Learning to assess in higher education: a collaborative exploration of the interplay of 'formal' and 'informal' learning in the academic workplace***

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## **1. Introduction**

During 2005 to 2010 74 Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) were funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). As the name suggests, the aim of the CETL initiative was to reward and develop expertise in teaching and learning linked to particular areas of excellence. The CETL where the authors of this paper worked focused on developing Assessment for Learning (AFL) practices (McDowell et al., 2008). The paper discusses the findings from three research projects undertaken at the CETL which can be grouped under the broad theme of the exploration of assessment practices and academic development. However, while we are all interested in the ways academics learn to assess, the disciplinary/research backgrounds and theoretical assumptions we bring to our respective projects are quite different.

Hodkinson and Macleod (2010) discuss conceptualisations of learning by referring to metaphors which are commonly used 'when learning is thought about' (p.174): learning as acquisition, as participation, as construction, as *formation* and as becoming. They argue that each metaphor assumes particular approaches to understanding and researching learning, and this also applies to the projects drawn on for this paper.

The projects which have generated the data considered in this paper are, on the one hand, underpinned and informed by different conceptualisations of learning, bodies of literature and methodologies. On the other hand, the institutional context within which the data were collected and the data collection methods, i.e. semi-structured interviews, are the same. This paper also explores the benefits and challenges of working collaboratively on HE research questions from different theoretical perspectives. We would like to argue that that using data generated by all three projects is a legitimate, albeit unusual, way of advancing our understanding of learning in the academic workplace since it allows us to focus on the interface between informal and formal learning rather than discussing one type of learning at the expense of the other.

## **2. Literature review**

While there has been considerable research into HE teachers' development and their conceptions of teaching more generally (see, for instance, Trigwell et al., 1994, Trigwell et al., 1999, Kane et al., 2002, Eley, 2006), the way in which HE staff become assessors and learn about assessment has not been widely researched. Samuelowicz and Bain's (2002) study identified orientations to assessment which show parallels to orientations to teaching: some HE teachers held beliefs which focused on knowledge reproduction, while other beliefs focused on knowledge construction and transformation, and they reported using assessment strategies which were in line with these beliefs. On the other hand, an on-going programme of research by Norton and colleagues (e.g. Shannon et al., 2008, Norton et al., 2009) and a study by Maclellan (2001) draw attention to discrepancies

between HE teachers' espoused theories of assessment and actual reported assessment practices. Jawitz' (2007, 2009), drawing on the workplace learning literature, highlights the importance of the context and of relationships within departmental Communities of Practice for understanding new academics' learning about assessment. This resonates with Knight et al. (2006) who emphasise the role of non-/informal learning in the academic workplace, and there is conflicting evidence for the impact of more formal academic development.

The workplace learning literature, which foregrounds everyday learning that takes place in and through work, makes an important contribution to understanding how academics learn to assess in the academic workplace. In much of the workplace learning literature learning is understood as 'informal' and contrasted with 'formal' learning that takes place in educational institutions and training programmes. An important contribution of the literature on 'informal' learning in workplaces is that it draws attention to the learning that takes place through everyday experience and participation in workplace practices. For example, there is an emerging literature using practice as an analytic lens for examining learning at work that elaborates the concept of learning in and through practice (e.g. Antonacopoulou, 2009; Gherardi, 2000, 2006; Green, 2009; Kemmis, 2005; Raelin, 2007). Gherardi (2006) argues that a focus on practice enables an analysis of knowledge as a practical and situated activity. A view of knowledge as collective, situated and provisional rather than individual, universal and fixed draws attention to the importance of context in shaping how people acquire knowledge and the ways practices are socially sustained and reproduced. Gherardi (2006) points to the interrelationships between work practices and learning:

*...in everyday practices, learning and knowing are not separate activities; they instead take place in the flow of experience, with or without our being aware of it. In everyday organizational life, work, learning, innovation, communication, negotiation, conflict over goals, their interpretation, and history, are co-present in work practice. They are part of human existence. (Gherardi, 2006: 14)*

There are a number philosophical positions underpinning the workplace learning literature, which in turn influence the ways learning at work can be theorised and understood (Fenwick, 2006; Harman, 2007; Harris, 2006). For instance the practice view outlined by Gherardi above emphasises context and the situated nature of knowledge production whereas much of the organisational and workplace learning literature is underpinned by individualised accounts which presuppose the autonomous subject – a subject who is able to transcend organisational power and politics to objectively 'know' (Harman, 2009). Individualised accounts of learning tend to reinforce an informal/formal binary where learning is understood as either 'informal' and separate from set curriculum or 'formal' and connected with structured curriculum. This separation is evident in the work of Eraut (2004) who defines informal learning as:

*learning that comes closer to the informal end than the formal end of a continuum. Characteristics of the informal end of the continuum of formality include implicit, unintended, opportunistic and unstructured learning and the absence of a teacher. In the middle come activities like mentoring, while coaching is rather more formal in most settings. (Eraut, 2004: 250)*

However, Colley, Hodkinson, and Malcolm (2002) question the value and validity of thinking about learning as having separable formal and informal dimensions. They suggest that in nearly all situations where learning takes place both formal and informal learning are present and it is not the boundaries that are significant but the interrelationships between dimensions of formality/informality. They outline several advantages of thinking about learning in this way including:

*Such an approach makes it easier to ask and address questions about the respective benefits of formality and informality, how productive balances between the two can be sustained, and how damaging imbalances can be resisted. It helps is [sic] step outside paradigmatic arguments that formal = bad, informal = good, or vice versa. (Colley, Hodkinson, and Malcolm, 2002, unpagged)*

Furthermore, in a more recent review of the workplace learning literature Tynjälä (2008) notes that while formal learning opportunities have a role to play in the development of expertise, that research on workplace learning stresses that formal and informal dimensions of learning are intertwined. Thus, rather than taking up a view where learning to assess in HE is understood as either 'informal' or 'formal', the starting position for this paper is one that takes account of the interplay between the two. We suggest that this view contributes to the literature on academic development by providing a richer understanding of how academics learn to assess in the academic workplace.

### **3. Three research projects on learning to assess in higher education**

The paper draws on empirical data from three research projects undertaken at one UK university: the 'Assessment Cultures' project, the 'Staff Learning' project and the 'CETL Associates' project.

The 'Assessment Cultures' project explores interrelationships between socio-cultural context and academic assessment practices. 37 interviews were conducted with academics from across three different Schools (Design, Business and Applied Sciences): 24 initial and 13 follow-up interviews. In the initial interviews lecturers described how they assess in specific modules they teach. In the follow-up interviews themes such as disciplinary and occupational background and the ways lecturers learned to assess were explored. Rather than examining this data from an interpretive perspective and the view that the language of the academics neutrally reflects a pre-existing reality (in this case the reality of the academic workplace), the researchers working on this project were interested in the ways academics were active in constructing particular social realities in and through their text. A conceptualisation of learning as 'becoming' underpinned this project. Hodkinson and Macleod (2010) define this learning metaphor as 'a blending of learning as participation with learning as embodied construction, in a broadly Deweyan sense'. In other words, rather than learning being understood as static and an individualised activity, it is understood as the ongoing identity work that takes place in and through participation in workplace practices.

The 'Staff Learning' project examines learning about assessment through different types of formal academic development: a compulsory module on assessment for new academics and a module on AfL for experienced staff. 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted: 8 with participants of the module for new academics and 6 with participants of the AfL module. The 'CETL Associates' project investigates a staff network which individuals or teams can join. Being an Associate or member of an Associate Team provides them with access to 1-1 support, opportunities for informal sharing of practice, events such as workshops, reading and discussion groups and the availability of resources and funding for small and large-scale projects. 17 semi-structured interviews were undertaken: 8 with individual Associates and 9 with members of Associate Teams across a number of Schools in the university. In both the 'Staff Learning' and the 'CETL Associates' projects interviewees were asked about the benefits or otherwise of the type of academic development experienced, changes in their understanding of assessment and changes in their assessment practices. The two projects tried to combine an evaluation of the respective academic development initiatives (formal modules on assessment, informal AfL network) with generating insight into conceptual change achieved through different types of academic development. With the emphasis being on conceptual change, the

conceptualisation of learning underpinning the projects, following Hodkinson and Macleod (2010), can best be described as ‘learning as construction’.

While the projects were designed and conducted under different methodological premises, the focus on the interface between formal and informal learning led us to a thematic approach to data analysis, initially looking very broadly within each project for themes which were associated with everyday learning in the academic workplace on the one hand and learning through more formal academic development, provided through courses and the CETL, on the other. Within the themes, we then specifically focused on identifying data that would shed light on the interface between informal and formal learning. We deliberately did not look for empirical evidence in order to ‘prove’ that the interface existed, but worked on the assumption that it does exist and aimed to understand in more detail how formal and informal aspects of learning interact in the academic workplace and specifically in relation to assessment. We tried to get away from a binary model of thinking about workplace learning where learning is either formal or informal, and intended to focus on references to both informal as well as formal learning in all three data sets.

## 4. Findings

### What higher education staff learn about assessment

When examining the three projects in detail, it soon becomes evident that they emphasise slightly different aspects of learning in relation to assessment. While the Assessment Cultures project focuses on learning *to assess*, the CETL Associates and the Staff Learning project focuses on learning *about assessment*. This is visible in the questions which were asked in the interviews and the data that were generated. For instance, the key question that was asked in the Assessment Cultures project is: ‘How did you learn to be an assessor?’ In contrast, a core question in the Staff Learning and CETL Associates projects was ‘Has your understanding of assessment changed?’ Considering data from all three projects has therefore provided us with insight into a fuller range of learning in relation to assessment, both learning to assess as well as learning about assessment.

As a consequence we have been able to identify three distinct areas of learning that interviewees have talked about:

- a) Judging the quality and standard of students’ work in the discipline
- b) Assessment design and diverse assessment formats
- c) Assessment-specific concepts and terminology

Each area will be illustrated with appropriate quotes before we move to a discussion of the ways in which they are being learnt.

#### Learning to judge the quality and standard of students’ work in the discipline

Marking and judging students’ work appears to be one of the first associations which HE teachers have when responding to questions about assessment. In the Assessment Cultures interviews several interviewees reflect upon the way in which they learnt to judge the quality of students’ work and attach marks to it.

*I didn’t learn to be a teacher or an assessor. (...) It was like, ‘Right, there’s the year group, off you go. We’ve got to mark them so let’s get on with it’ and so there was no training, no sort of... We were just told the criteria that we had to judge them on and I suppose by sitting with someone who’d done it for a long time, you get, with them taking the lead and you’re sort of the second marker, you start getting a feel for how things are judged. (Cultures Dave)*

Developing a sense of the quality and standards which are expected of students' work is not only relevant for marking, but also for assessment design. The interviews also contain accounts of critical incidents which illustrate how difficult and emotionally challenging the process of learning to judge students' work can be:

*We swapped assessments for the moderation so I received some to moderate and during that moderation, the module tutor said I'd marked too harshly and they changed the marks and said some of the comments weren't appropriate (...). And I'd said at the time, 'Well that's why...' because before I received the assessments, I said, 'Can I sit down and go through what's expected?' and it was just like, 'No, you just go away and you mark them and that's it.' So after I'd done that, I almost became paranoid about marking! (Cultures Billy 2)*

While this is an account by an experienced member of staff who thinks back at his/her early experiences of learning to judge students' work, a very similar incident is related by a PGCert participant whose conclusion suggests that his/her informal learning is 'supported' by formal learning:

*My [PGCert] mentor actually was moderating with me and she actually said that she could see that my confidence had grown and that I had improved in terms of putting the right grade on things, so it's a steep learning curve in your first teaching year and so [the PGCert] supports that, perhaps in a way that you don't realise. (PC2)*

### **Learning about assessment design and formats**

Another area of learning that is talked about in the interviews is that of assessment design. Several interviewees mention having acquired a much broader repertoire of summative assessment formats over time. They frequently refer to having started off by using conventional formats such as essays and examinations and then gradually trying out alternative formats, as the quotes below illustrate:

*My horizons as an assessor have been broadened hugely because I used to do exams and bits of written coursework and dissertations (...). And now it has broadened. (...) So things like the [title] show, which is photography based, and these little comics and books, and things like the video making during the second year field-trip, things like the posters we've experimented with, with the third and first years, and things like presentation. (Cultures Alex)*

### **Learning about assessment-specific concepts and terminology**

Concepts and terminology are highlighted as an important area of learning by several interviewees. It is perhaps not surprising that this aspect is particularly discussed in the interviews with course participants and also features in the interviews with CETL Associates since these interviews contained questions about interviewees' understanding of assessment (for learning) and conceptual change. Several interviewees stress that specific concepts have changed their understanding of assessment, that they have helped them to frame their practice and have provided them with categories and a language with which to talk about and analyse their practice. Here the interplay between formal and informal is particularly evident.

#### ***What would you say you have got out of the assessment module (...)?***

*I think the terminology, you sort of feel, okay, I understand... When I go to meetings now and people say 'formative' and 'summative' I now have a clue about what's going on rather than sitting there thinking, 'I'll ask someone to interpret that for me later' (PC2)*

Being introduced to assessment-related concepts has allowed some interviewees to become aware of and make explicit aspects of their practice which they had previously been unaware of. This is sometimes described as having practised intuitively and subconsciously, without having the language and analytical categories to fully understand one's own practice. For instance, a member of

staff who provides study skills support talks about the way in which the notion of AfL has made him/her reconsider his/her role in relation to assessment:

*I perhaps realised that I was offering more in terms of formative assessment than I'd realised. (...) It made me think along those lines that I am in the business of assessment in some way, shape or form. I'm not sitting down and putting grades on essays, but I am still there with it. So the module made me think in that way and I think perhaps I hadn't been as aware of that before. (AfL4)*

Some interviewees set out to use assessment-specific concepts as an analytical lens to understand and develop their own practice:

*It [the notion of AfL] gives you some sort of framework you can start looking at and looking to your own practices and how they can be, how you can better understand actually what is happening and how it's impacting on students and how they can benefit from those improvements. (CETL A3)*

We have explained in the literature review section that the staff learning project has been informed by the literature on conceptual change and that we were particularly interested in evidence for transformed conceptualisations of assessment. For some interviewees, the notion of AfL definitely seems to have had a transformative effect:

*The whole assessment for learning idea (...), it's made me think about assessment in a way that I haven't before, so using assessment as a tool for learning rather than just a means of students achieving a mark. And that was (...) like a light bulb suddenly switched on for me. (PC6)*

The following two quotes taken from an interview with one participant of the AfL module show that his/her understanding of assessment has changed through formal engagement with the notion of AfL stimulated by the module which now informally guides him/her, thus contributing to changes in his/her assessment practice:

*I would say it[AfL]'s almost part of my being now. So it influences... If I've got anything to do with assessment, it's part of my consciousness. (...) I'd be thinking, 'Okay, how is this assessment helping learning?'(AfL5)*

*[As a learning activity on the AfL module] we had to take a module and kind of reinvent it really, a module that maybe needed lots of work doing to it, so I took the [title] module from Level 3 and looked at what was good and not so good about it, and then completely rewrote it. (...) I think if I hadn't have been doing the [AfL] module then we maybe wouldn't have passed... I don't know whether we would've done it, we might have done something with it but we wouldn't have done what we have done to the same extent. Because we've completely changed it. (AfL5)*

## **How higher education staff learn about assessment**

### **Learning from and with others**

The fact that HE teachers learn from and with others has been repeatedly shown in the literature. Jawitz (2007, 2009) has analysed the role of Communities of Practice for staff learning within the workplace. Studies of courses for new HE teachers have demonstrated that the opportunities which courses provide for participants to interact with and learn from each other are regarded as a major benefit of courses, including exchanges across disciplinary boundaries (Knight, 2006, Hanbury et al, 2008). This is also confirmed by the analysis of the interviews considered for this paper.

### **Gaining insight into other people's assessment practices**

Interviewees from all three data sets stress that talking to other HE teachers is useful as it allows them to gain insight into each other's assessment practices which would otherwise have remained

inaccessible. Formal and informal dialogue with other people about their assessment practices provides them with ideas for their own practice.

*It [the AfL module] was the opportunity to meet people, experienced colleagues from across the University, different disciplines, and see what they did and see what worked for them and what didn't, and what advice they had. (AfL2)*

*The School has got much better (...) by people sharing ways that they assess. It all used to be rather hidden so I had no idea of how [Name] next door, for example, was assessing his module or [Name] next door was assessing hers. And that's changed dramatically. So I think it's better... (CETL T2)*

*It was learning from others and then you would work with different people on different modules so you'd learn lots of different levels of looking at things and different ways that people work. (Cultures Daphne)*

The following quote from the Assessment Cultures project demonstrates the way in which formal and informal aspects of learning from others are intertwined. The interviewee highlights that s/he picks up ideas for his/her own practice from a variety of sources, both sought out intentionally by attending a learning and teaching conference, and unintentionally by chatting to colleagues. Both formal and informal learning lead to potential changes to assessment practices:

*The ideas often come from little things I've caught people say; 'Oh, you don't have to do it that way; you could do it this way!' or 'You don't have to do a written... Do a poster!' and it could be a fleeting little thing and it needn't be a big grand presentation or conference, although equally, I have been to things like the [internal learning and teaching] conference and thought, 'Ooh, that's a nice idea!' so it can be fleeting little moments or it can be specific events I've gone to, whether it's workshops here or the [internal learning and teaching] Conference, where I've heard other people's examples and thought, 'Yeah, that would work, wouldn't it? Why didn't I think of that before?' (Cultures Alex)*

### **Learning within as well as beyond disciplines and local contexts**

The above quotes illustrate that sharing and discussion of practice take place both within interviewees' own disciplinary and organisational context, e.g. within their subject groupings or Schools, but also across disciplines and local contexts. Both are considered to be useful learning experiences. The formal learning opportunities provided via courses and the Associates Network appear to have a particular propensity to stimulate exchanges which go beyond disciplinary and local boundaries. However, the importance of learning within or outside their own discipline or School is seen quite differently by individual interviewees:

*The main thing I do is I talk to [name] who is in our Division, just talking about current things that are going on in teaching and learning really. To be honest, I haven't been able to keep up with a lot of the activities in CETL (CETL A2)*

*The important thing is being able to meet other people, colleagues. And that there is a central hub that is not associated to any of the Schools. (CETL A3)*

In some interviewee statements in relation to learning from others the close interface between informal and formal learning is particularly evident. In the following excerpt a PGCert participant talks about the way in which participation in the assessment module has stimulated informal dialogue with other course participants from the same academic School:

*We've formed quite a small [School] group, there are only 4 of us in it but we meet quite regularly to discuss ideas, and that's been useful. (...) It arose out of the module just because we were the only ones from [our School] in the group, we were put together in one of our presentation groups and one of the colleagues I work with quite closely, because we teach together, the other two I hadn't met before and they both teach on different programmes unrelated to my other colleague, but we get on quite well and we've got very different*



*background and ideas but it's been nice to think them through... So it's been a bit of a support network really, towards [the PGCert], but also talking about brainstorming ideas and the things we teach on. It's been quite good in that way. (PC7)*

### **Belonging: learning alongside like-minded people**

When talking about learning from each other, some interviewees express a feeling of belonging to a community of like-minded people who share similar values in relation to assessment and to learning. CETL Associates and AfL module participants talk about joining the module and/or the Associates network and about learning from members of these communities as something with emotional significance. This affective side appears to be an important aspect of learning from and with each other and has formal and informal dimensions at the same time:

*Thinking you do something and you know about things and you do it well and then being part of a module that's about that, with other people who have the same beliefs as you, probably, or similar you think, 'Oh we're likeminded...' you know, or 'There are other people who think like I do' (AfL3)*

As discussed before, for some interviewees it is important that this community of like-minded people transcends organisational and disciplinary boundaries. For others, like-minded people can be found within their local contexts and disciplines:

*The process taught at University is almost exactly the same as that used in industry, (...) working with the students in a very similar way that I worked with junior designers around me in the studio. (...) The approach I had, it felt very similar to the rest of the team; we all mark and think in similar ways. (Cultures Dave 2)*

Although learning within a community of like-minded people appears to be important, being party to practices which interviewees radically disagree with seems to be an equally important learning experience. Similar to learning with and from like-minded colleagues, these negative experiences bring the values which underpin assessment practices to the fore. The following interview excerpt provides an examples of an interviewees distancing him/herself from values, opinions and practices s/he observed:

*And I went to do some work at [another university, (...) they were still very much, 'It's a First, darling' or 'It's a 2:1, darling' and that's the end of it. (...) And that really made me furious. (...) I said, 'Well, how does a student know what they've got to do?' (...) And it was like, 'Well, if they don't know then they're not a First, are they?' (...) I just couldn't believe that mentality existed in somewhere that I regarded as one of the best institutions for [my subject]. (...) That made me come back here and think, 'My students will never be in the dark like that. Never.' (CETL AfL 3)*

### **Socialisation into the practices of the discipline and local context**

When asked how they learnt to be an assessor, many of the interviewees for the Assessment Cultures project refer to their prior experiences as student of their disciplines. Rather than entering HE as a blank slate, they already have an understanding and expectations of assessment within their discipline which they build on when developing their own practices as assessors:

*You learn a little bit from when you're a student. (...). I went through quite a traditional assessment regime, based mainly on exams, with some tutorial contact, and also some skills and techniques bases workshops, with assessments done during those workshops. And the only feedback you got from the exams was a mark, you didn't get any detailed feedback. And the only feedback that you got was from your tutor. And so you often reflect on that and think, 'What was good about that, and what would I have liked more of?' (...) And then when you start working in academia, you then build on that and you see what colleagues do on other modules. (Cultures Alan)*

Many interviewees describe how working alongside colleagues has socialised them into the practices of their discipline and immediate local context, such as the School or the programme they contribute

to. Working alongside colleagues includes conversations, both formal and informal ones, e.g. with someone they are sharing the office with, joint marking, double-marking and moderating, team teaching, designing modules, programmes and assessment strategies.

**Okay, how did you learn to be an assessor?**

*I think from my colleagues actually, as a young, new lecturer, we've always done a lot of marking together and crits, so I'd sort of watch and see and hear, yes, that's... It sounds extraordinary, but that sort of filters in.*

*(...)*

*Well, we'd talk about it in referring to specific pieces of work and also (...) when we've discussed the course structure and the marking of modules and all this kind of thing, then talking about criteria and talking about learning outcomes. (Cultures Deirdre)*

**Learning norms**

Learning with and from others is not a neutral process as it involves operating within and negotiating power relationships. These relationships then shape assessment practices since disciplinary and local norms are internalised in the process. Several interviewees refer to learning from more experienced and/or more senior colleagues and adjusting their practices accordingly. The following interview excerpts not only show the existence of these norms, but also demonstrate that learning from others is responsible for maintaining 'the way we do things here' and that it can be difficult to challenge these norms.

*I think if I'd started here and said, 'I'm only doing 2 hours part-time but by the way, I think we should do assessment in a much more sort of broader and in depth and contemporary manner.' I think that would've been the last 2 hours I'd worked here! So you don't want to upset a well-established applecart. (Cultures Dennis)*

*I awarded a 92 for a student's piece of work because I thought it was fantastic, but it was brought down to 85. (Laughter). Because they know if it's that high it's going to push the average and for me, that's just crazy. I just think that if it's worth it then it should be awarded. But in the moderation, I don't necessarily argue the points and say, 'Well you know, one was 85, one is 92. It should be definitely 92!' because I can never really find a reason why because there's nothing that says an 80 is this and an 85 is that and a 90 is this, and again, a lot of the group are my former lecturers so I feel maybe I should be listening to their viewpoint rather than putting forward my own. It's quite tough. (Cultures Billy)*

**Being critical and challenging norms**

While the section above has highlighted that it can be difficult to challenge the norms that HE teachers are socialised into, there is considerable evidence that both being challenged as well as challenging existing norms are also important components of learning. The following example illustrates the way in which the assessment module for new academics stimulates some participants to question the taken for granted norms and practices within their discipline. During the module, participants with the same or associated subject backgrounds are asked to present an element of their assessment practice and its strengths and weaknesses to the other module participants. Several interviewees refer to this presentation and discuss the way in which the peer feedback from participants with other discipline backgrounds in particular has challenged them to question the rationale for disciplinary assessment norms.

*We were actually challenged a great deal in that presentation and people were saying, 'This sounds harsh to students' and 'Are you sure you want to keep this...?' and that's why... My colleague came away with the idea that we've always assumed coursework is right because it's what we all did when we were [subject] students ourselves, and it seems like a fairly bog standard approach to assessment for [Name] School students. The students tend to like it because they get time to prepare rather than the examination, but we were, people did say it sounded very harsh, things like 'Do they get to see the question in advance?' or 'Do they just get the coursework and three weeks to answer it?' And from our perspective, we were very defensive in saying, 'Well they've got three weeks to deal with the question so why would they need it in advance?' and people were*

*saying, 'Sounds like a very difficult assessment for students' and 'Are you sure it meets the objectives and the assessment criteria?' so it did give us a lot of food for thought about presentation. (PC2)*

This example demonstrates the way in which a task set within the context of a formal course can result in an awareness of disciplinary norms, which may potentially lead to changes to established workplace practices. The following highlights that the criticality the interviewee is talking about contains both formal and informal dimensions:

*And another part of the module was that you (...) put a module together, not just, you know, you had to think 'Why are we doing this? What's behind it? Why are we giving this this weighting?' and it made you focus down very specific things and question your own judgement about 'Let's not just take this for granted. Let's unpick it, why are we doing it in this way?' So that kind of thing is useful because it does impact on everything else, that questioning, reflecting, 'Let's stand back and look at what we're doing here' is useful because... And maybe I've done that to an extent over in [where I work], I mean, maybe it just comes over as me being grumpy and irritable, but you know, maybe I have with other colleagues, questioned, 'Well, we've got this programme but why are we offering it in this way? Who's coming along and...? We're getting a tremendous number of international students and why is that and should we do anything about that? How is that impacting on our teaching? We're offering basic courses that we found a lot of postgraduate students came along to and so why is that?' So I think, just that whole approach and that came from the AfL I think, more than... as much as any of the other modules, this reflecting a lot on what was going on. (AfL 2)*

We mentioned above that several interviewees highlighted the usefulness of assessment related concepts and terminology. The quote below shows that for some people the notion of AfL serves as a conceptual tool which allows them to critique existing workplace practices:

*That [AfL]'s the big message that the [PGCert] course has got through. I do now look at colleagues who are assessing their student with exams or tests and think 'Well, that's a bit strange. How does that work?' and it seems not relevant to the subject and doesn't seem to add anything either for the students or for the teaching staff, and I guess it's just the way it's always been done. (PC5)*

In the following interview excerpt the interplay between formal and informal learning is particularly evident. The interviewee talks about what s/he has learnt on the assessment module for new academics and provides an example of the way in which s/he directly applied it to his/her role as internal moderator. In the previous section we highlighted the impact of power relationships on maintaining the status quo, and this example demonstrates the way in which the learning undertaken on a course provided the interviewee with the necessary underpinning and thus confidence to examine and challenge the practice of a more senior colleague, despite the power differential between them. Learning the conceptual tools and discursive resources as well as learning to challenge practices appear to go hand in hand and are formal and informal at the same time.

*I was given the job of being an internal moderator for some of the Northumbria modules, so I mean, it [the course] opened my eyes to what an internal moderator should be doing. And I think I surprised my head of division because he was very pleased at the manner in which I'd carried it out. He said 'You were very thorough!' So I think...*

***For instance, what were the kinds of ideas you took on board?***

*I was going to this internal moderation (...) For example, the marking criteria, I wasn't sure if it had been provided to the students before the exam or not. And then I was going through the manner in which it had been marked or assessed and the same assessor had given a 10 out of 10 to one student for mentioning the same thing, and to another he had given 6 out of 10 (...) He's quite a senior lecturer but he was a little surprised that I actually questioned him on that, but I think it made me look at a new way at which we assess students and what we're assessing and whether we are being fair to the students at every point, or not. (PC4)*

The interviews suggest that being critical and challenging norms requires confidence, in particular if it involves cutting across hierarchies. In the example above, confidence appears to have been derived from the understandings of assessment and conceptual underpinnings developed through the assessment module. However, there are indications of other influences that allow staff to assess in ways which do not necessarily adhere to the norm. The CETL itself is perceived as an institutional symbol which, through its existence, gives permission to experiment and challenge existing norms in assessment. Learning new assessment practices is therefore made easier under the umbrella of CETL. Challenging norms is also easier when it is done collectively rather than by individuals on their own. In the interviews with CETL Associates in particular, there is evidence of some entire teams learning about assessment together and, as a consequence, making changes to assessment practice.

### **Formal elements within informal learning**

Although interviewees describe everyday learning at work in a way which suggests that it is coincidental and unsystematic, we would like to suggest that this is not necessarily the case. It is noticeable that formal mechanisms structure and regulate the learning that, on the surface, is taking place in a random, haphazard manner. For instance, in the cases discussed above where interviewees' judgements about students' marks were queried and subsequently changed, this happened in the context of a formal moderation process. Other formal mechanisms such as team meetings, validations, module and programme reviews, external examiners, funded and unfunded practice development or research projects etc. are repeatedly mentioned by the interviewees when discussing everyday learning at work.

*We have at least one module meeting per semester but it tends to be two, if it's for a module running for one semester; if it's a module running for the year, then we'd look at three to four meetings across that year and yes, there are discussions about 'Do you think any changes need to be made to the assessment? What do we all think about it?' and we'll go back and think about the results from the previous year and comments and issues that arose. (Cultures Billy)*

When staff discuss changes they have made, these are described as experiments, reminiscent of action research cycles, where an intervention is implemented, evidence is gathered, evaluated and further changes are made:

*I also have tried peer review and that was the result of students that were on placement, 2 or 3 of them were together and one member of the team hadn't really pulled their weight. So I then thought, 'Probably if there was some sort of peer assessment going on, this would not be happening' and I've done it ever since and it never has repeated itself. But I haven't yet worked out how to do this effectively online. (CETL, A2)*

With these accounts in mind we need to question whether this kind of learning is really as informal as it appears and suggest that it provides additional insight into the way in which informal and formal learning are interlinked.

### **Interviewees' constructions of informal learning, formal learning and the interplay**

To a certain extent and with different emphases, most interviews include some explicit or implicit discussion of the nature of everyday learning and learning through more formal means, e.g. courses or other forms of academic development such as the CETL. For instance, module participants were specifically asked about perceived differences between learning through a course and everyday informal learning at work. These types of questions resulted in statements which allow us to gain insight into interviewees' own constructions of 'formal' and 'informal' learning and of the interface between the two. This aspect of our analysis is still in progress, and this section of the paper therefore only offers a brief summary of our observations so far.

We have already mentioned that several interviewees depict their everyday learning related to assessment as learning through 'trial and error' and 'experimenting'. Things being 'picked up by accident' are contrasted with courses which are described as providing 'structure' and a 'guided tour through the topic'. Metaphors such as newcomers 'being thrown in at the deep end' and then having 'swimming lessons' are used in order to depict the relationship between everyday learning and learning through a course. It is noticeable that some constructions are underpinned by an assumed binary opposition, while others focus much more on the interplay. It appears to be experienced members of staff in particular whose constructions contain references to the interplay, while some novice HE teachers tend to find it difficult to reconcile theory and practice, learning to assess and learning about assessment. Below is an example of a new academic describing the formal learning opportunities provided by the assessment module as an unnecessary duplication of what s/he has already learnt informally, while an experienced members of staff talks about the way in which s/he has learnt through using the conceptual framework provided via the CETL Associates network in order to make sense of and develop their own assessment practice, i.e. formal and informal elements interact and are regarded as complementing and drawing on each other:

New academic:

*I think it [the assessment module]'s probably more valuable to people with less experience. (...) I've had to do a lot of this and been thrown in at the deep end, so I've probably got more knowledge than some others. (PC7)*

Experienced academic:

*It was interesting at that last reading group to actually get (...) what I'd been doing in some sort of more formalised structure, and to get the opportunity to see things that I could go away and read to clarify in my mind what I've been doing, I suppose, a little bit intuitively. (...)*

*(...)*

*Being a CETL Associate is (...) making me challenge what I do and how I do it, and in some cases, just understanding it better, it's sort of clarifying the process, which is good because then it enables you to see more clearly further developments that you might make. (CETL A5)*

We need to be wary of interpreting these constructions simplistically as face value evidence to support or dispute the existence of formal and informal learning as separate entities. The interviews contain multiple constructions of informal and formal learning and of the interplay, and further analysis needs to be undertaken in order to fully understand how staff make sense of the way in which they learn formally as well as informally.

## **5. Methodological reflections**

Writing this paper collaboratively has provided an opportunity to examine our respective data through the lenses of different theoretical frameworks and heightened our awareness for 'the theoretical frames of reference and methodological approaches which shape (...) [our] knowledge claims' (Shay, p.1) as it has required us to engage with each others' perspectives and backgrounds. This involved not only explicit consideration of theory and methodology, but also of our respective professional roles. It has made us reflect upon the factors which influenced the design of the projects and the differences between them, but also of the tensions inherent in each individual project which otherwise might not have come to the fore.

The CETL Associates project started off as an evaluation of the CETL Associate Scheme which sought to identify its impact on Associates' practice and the institution more widely, as part of a general CETL research and evaluation strategy. Data collection was carried out by one of the authors who was the CETL Research Officer with a prior involvement in several other CETL evaluation studies and a discipline background in information studies, i.e. outside education. Another author, who is an academic developer with a background in student learning research and an interest in the way in

which HE staff learn, joined the project halfway through the design process and was keen to influence its direction by adding a focus on researching staff understandings of assessment (for learning) and the impact of the CETL as a particular form of academic development. The final interview schedule was negotiated to include both questions about the CETL and about learning and conceptual change in relation to assessment. These were then also adapted for use in the staff learning project which the same author developed concurrently. Here she was more directly involved as not only did she conduct the interviews, she had also been one of the teachers on the two modules. As in the CETL Associates project, intentions were twofold as the project aimed to provide insight into the role of courses for staff understandings of assessment and assessment practice, but also sought to evaluate the effectiveness of the modules and their delivery formats with a view to improving them. This meant that the projects could be framed in different ways, as evaluations or as educational research contributing to knowledge about staff learning about assessment. Or should they be considered to be scholarship of academic development, in parallel with Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (e.g. Kreber and Cranton, 2000, Trigwell et al., 2000), i.e. knowledge created through systematic, theory and research informed enquiry and reflection about academic development made public? Our methodological reflections brought potential conflict between these research purposes to the surface, but also alerted us to the implicit hierarchy of methodologies in HE research. We began to wonder whether the explicit foregrounding of methodology in HECU5 has the potential to privilege certain types of research over others, and whether a hierarchy of methodologies might also be reflected in the three projects considered in this paper.

By challenging ways of knowing through collaboration, this paper makes a contribution to the 'region' (Shay, p.2). In the critical review of student learning research, which Shay refers to in her 'think piece', Haggis (2009) explicitly highlights the potential of the workplace learning literatures and debates for 'thinking differently' about higher education research. Another of the authors has a background in workplace learning and a research interest in how workers learn in and through participating in everyday workplace practices. She considers learning to be identity work, which fits with a metaphor of learning as 'becoming' (Hodkinson and Macleod 2010). The conceptual framework underpinning this perspective is a Foucauldian notion of processes of subjectification (Foucault, 1982, 1988). This perspective enables an examination of the take up of particular subject positions by workers (their identifications) that are made available through the circulation of various discourses in their workplace. It is a view of learning that enables relations of power to be made visible as well as the interrelationship between workplace practices and the identity work that takes place in workplaces, and it also places an emphasis on language and the work done by language. Thus, a discursive analysis of the interview texts was undertaken in the Assessment Cultures project rather than reading the interviews as neutrally reflecting a pre-existing reality (e.g. Harman & McDowell, 2010, forthcoming).

When writing and analysing the data for this paper, we had to stand back from our respective methodologies and reconcile them in order to produce a cohesive and convincing paper. In order to achieve this aim we decided to undertake an interpretive rather than a discursive analysis. However, many of the themes that a Foucauldian poststructuralist perspective foregrounds, such as an interest in examining relations of power in learning relationships were explored in the analysis. We have also started to examine the discursive constitution of formal and informal learning in the interview texts and will develop this aspect of the analysis further. In addition, the other authors who did not come from a Foucauldian perspective have become much more aware of the discursive constructions evident in the CETL Associates and Staff Learning interviews and have therefore become interested in exploring these data from a discourse analytical point of view. In contrast, the author with a background in workplace learning became increasingly interested in the literature on

the development of novice HE teachers, on academic development and on courses for (new) HE staff and its take on learning in the academic workplace.

As discussed, each of the projects had a particular focus and analytic lens which illuminated particular aspects of learning while making others less visible. For example, in the Assessment Cultures project there was considerable talk by academics about the ways they have learned to assess through participating in and through everyday workplace practices whereas this was less evident in the Staff Learning project. Similarly, there was little reference to courses and training programmes in the interviews from the Assessment Cultures project but much talk about this way of learning in the Staff Learning project. Both the Staff Learning and the CETL Associates projects explicitly discussed interviewees' understandings of assessment (for learning) and possible changes in their understandings while this was not addressed in the Assessment Cultures project. In combining the data from these projects these gaps become evident but so too does the possibility of constructing an account of learning that incorporates the complexities of the interplay of formal and informal.

Writing the paper stimulated methodological discussions which would otherwise not have taken place, and the example above is one of many issues that were discussed. Throughout the analysis and writing stages we asked ourselves a number of critical questions: What type of research are we conducting: pedagogic, applied, practice-based, educational research, evaluation, scholarship of academic development? How have our professional roles influenced the type of research we are pursuing? What impact has the institutional agenda had on the nature of our research? Are all three projects equal in the hierarchy of academic research, or are some more equal than others? How have our own experiences as assessors (or the absence of such experiences) influenced which aspects of the data we have attended to? How legitimate is it to combine data from research projects generated under different premises? How different or similar are the projects? What are we gaining, or losing, by collaborating with each other?

We also grappled with issues specific to the theme examined in this paper. Despite our intention to get away from a binary model and focus on the *interplay* between formal and informal learning, we frequently fell into the trap of reverting back to the model that we were trying to dispute. It also proved difficult not to equate everyday learning at work with informal learning and learning through academic development with formal learning and to focus specifically on the interplay between formal and informal learning.

In summary, the joint methodological reflections stimulated by writing a paper for HECU 5 have added a dimension to our collaboration which would otherwise have received much less attention and, we feel, has contributed to the quality of the analysis undertaken.

## **6. Conclusion**

Our analysis has shown that a wide range of learning takes place in the academic workplace and that formal and informal learning interact with each other in many different ways. For example, there were numerous examples of academic development providing HE staff with the discursive resources for thinking and talking about their everyday learning and naming aspects of their assessment practice which may have otherwise been less visible. When formal learning was experienced as an opportunity to make sense of what had been learnt informally, the interplay between formal and informal learning became particularly noticeable, with the resulting learning being neither exclusively formal nor informal, but comprising elements of both. The course also provided newer academics with the authority to challenge often taken for granted assessment practices in their respective disciplinary workplaces. Furthermore, many HE staff noted that academic development

created spaces which enabled learning with both formal and informal characteristics. While this is not necessarily new, the focusing lens of the interplay between formal and informal might challenge academic developers to consider the learning that is enabled through intersecting discourses and what this opens up in terms of the organisation of academic development activities. Moreover the analysis draws attention to the structuring aspects of much of what is named 'informal' learning in the academic workplace, particularly in relation to assessment. It is through dialogic processes that judgements about the quality of student work and appropriate assessment design are constituted and learnt. Such dialogue is enabled in particular through assessment specific concepts and discourse, which are learnt and used within the context of courses as well as local, discipline-specific workplaces. Academics are thus active in the ongoing constitution of what counts as learning and how learning is assessed in their particular subject areas. We have also drawn attention to the biographies that academics bring with them to the workplace and the structuring work performed by disciplinary context that contributes to shaping assessment practices. As Hodkinson and Macleod (2010) note, academics are not empty slates when they enter the academic workplace.

Taken together, the data generated by the three projects have provided insight into the complex processes whereby formal and informal interact. Combining these data has enabled us to extend the scope of each individual project in order to address questions which could otherwise not have been answered. Collaborating with each other has also sharpened our awareness of a wide range of methodological issues and questions. Overall our analysis has confirmed that the simple distinction between formal and informal learning in the academic workplace may be too crude since formal and informal learning are closely interlinked. This has implications for the organisation of academic development and investigations of academic development and workplace learning in relation to assessment. If formal learning is not seen as separate from informal learning, it may be impossible to research or 'prove' the impact of formal learning opportunities. Similarly, academic development needs to be organised in a way which recognises and builds on the interplay between formal and informal learning in the academic workplace.

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